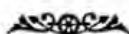


CHAPTER THREE

*Discourse on This Question: Which Is the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero and Which are the Heroes Who Lacked This Virtue?*¹

Proposed in 1751 by the Academy of Corsica



Notice

This piece is very bad, and I felt this so strongly after writing it that I did not even condescend to send it. It is easy to do less badly on the same subject, but not to do well, for there is never a good answer to make to frivolous questions. That is always a useful lesson to draw from a bad writing.

If I were not *Alexander*, said that Conqueror, I would want to be *Dio-genes*.² Would the Philosopher have said: if I were not who I am, I would want to be *Alexander*? I doubt it. A Conqueror would consent to be a Wise Man sooner than a Wise Man would consent to be a Conqueror. But what man in the world, with the exception of the Wise Man, would not consent to be a Hero? Thus it is felt that Heroism has its own virtues, which are not dependent on fortune at all, but which need it in order to develop. The Hero is the product of nature, fortune, and himself. To define him well, it would be necessary to indicate what he gets from each one of the three.

All the virtues belong to the Wise Man. The Hero compensates for the virtues he lacks by the brilliance of those he possesses. The virtues of the first are temperate, but he is exempt from vices. If the second has faults, they are effaced by the luster of his virtues. Always true, the former has no bad qualities; always great, the latter has none at all that are

SOURCE: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Social Contract, Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero, Political Fragments, and Geneva Manuscript. Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 4. Edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994.

mediocre. Both are firm and unshakable, but in different ways and about different things. One never yields except through reason, the other never does so except through generosity. Weaknesses are as little known to the Wise Man as are cowardly acts to the Hero; and violence has no more influence over the soul of the latter than the passions over that of the former.

There is more solidity, then, in the character of the Wise Man and more brilliance in that of the Hero. And the former would have to be given preference if one were satisfied to consider them thus in themselves. But if we envisage them in their relationship to the interest of Society, new reflections will soon produce different judgments and reinstate to the Heroic qualities the preeminence they deserve and that has been granted them in all centuries by common consent.

Indeed, the care of his own felicity is the Wise Man's entire occupation and that is doubtless a large enough one for an ordinary man. The views of the true Hero extend further. The happiness of men is his object, and it is to this sublime labor that he devotes the great soul he received from Heaven. The Philosophers, I admit, claim to teach men the art of being happy, and as if they were expecting to form nations of Wise Men, they preach to peoples a chimerical felicity which they do not have themselves and of which the people never acquire an idea or a taste. *Socrates* saw and deplored the misfortunes of his fatherland; but it fell to *Thrasylbus* to end them.³ And *Plato*, after having wasted his eloquence, his honor, and his time at a Tyrant's court, was forced to abandon to someone else the glory of freeing Syracuse from the yoke of tyranny.⁴ The Philosopher can give the Universe some salutary instructions, but his lessons will never correct either the Great who scorn them or the Populace which does not hear them at all. Men are not governed in that way by abstract views; one makes them happy only by constraining them to be so, and one must make them experience happiness in order to make them love it. Those are the occupation and talents of the Hero. It is often with a strong hand that he puts himself in a position to receive the Benedictions of men, whom he first constrains to bear the yoke of laws in order to subject them to the authority of reason in the end.

Of all the qualities of the soul, then, Heroism is the one with which it is the most important to Peoples that those who govern them be adorned. It is the collection of a large number of sublime virtues, rarely combined, rarer still in their energy, and all the more rare in that the Heroism which they constitute, detached from all personal interest, has only the felicity of others as its object and only their admiration as its reward.

I have said nothing here about the legitimate glory owed to great

actions. I have not talked at all about the strength of genius and other personal qualities necessary to the Hero, which—without being virtues—are often more useful than they are to the success of great ventures. To place the true hero in his rank, I have had recourse only to this incontestable principle: that among men it is the person who makes himself most useful to others who should be the first of them all. I have no fear that Wise Men will contest a decision based on that maxim.

It is true, and I hasten to admit it, that this manner of envisioning Heroism raises an objection that seems all the more difficult to resolve because it is drawn from the very foundation of the subject.

There must not be two Suns in nature nor two *Caesars* on earth, said the Ancients. Indeed, Heroism is like those precious metals whose value consists in their rarity and which would become pernicious or useless by their abundance. The person whose valor brought peace to the World would have been its desolation if there had been a single rival worthy of him. Certain circumstances can make a Hero necessary for the salvation of the human race, but at any time whatsoever, a people of Heroes would infallibly be its ruin, and like the soldiers of *Cadmus*,⁵ it would soon destroy itself.

What, someone will say to me, can multiplying the number of benefactors of the human race be dangerous for men, and can there be too many people who work for the happiness of all? Yes, without doubt, I shall reply, when they go about it badly or when they only appear to attend to it. Let us not conceal anything; public felicity is far less the end of the Hero's actions than it is a means to reach the one he sets for himself, and that end is almost always his personal glory. Love of glory has done countless good and bad things. Love of the fatherland is purer in its principle and more certain in its effects. So it is that the World has often been overburdened with Heroes, but nations will never have enough citizens. There is a great difference between the virtuous man and the one who has virtues. The virtues of the Hero rarely have their source in purity of soul, and—like those salutary but inactive drugs that must be activated by bitter and corrosive salts—it could be said that they need the cooperation of some vices to make them active.

Heroism must not be viewed, then, with the idea of a moral perfection that does not suit it at all, but as a composite of good and bad qualities, healthy or harmful according to the circumstances, and combined in such a proportion that the result is often more fortune and glory for the one who possesses them, and sometimes even more happiness for Peoples than would come from a more perfect virtue.

It follows from the careful development of these notions that there

can be many virtues opposed to Heroism, others which are indifferent to it; that others are more or less favorable to it according to their differing relationships to the great art of subjugating hearts and gaining the admiration of Peoples; and finally that among the latter there must be one that is more necessary, more essential, and more indispensable to it, and which characterizes it in some way. It is this special and specifically Heroic virtue that should be the object of my research here.

Nothing is so self-assured as ignorance, and doubt is as rare among the People as affirmation is in true Philosophers. Long ago common prejudice decided the question we raise today, and the warrior's valor has long been accepted by most men as the prime virtue of the Hero. Let us dare bring this blind prejudice before the Tribunal of reason, and let prejudices—so often its enemies and conquerors—learn to yield to it in turn.

Let us not reject the first reflection this subject provides, and let us agree first that Peoples have very thoughtlessly conferred their esteem and their praise on martial valor, or that it is a very odious inconsistency for them to believe that the benefactors of the human race announce their character by the destruction of men. We are both very blundering and very unfortunate if our admiration can be elicited only by our desolation. Must we believe, then, that if ever a time of happiness and peace were to be reborn among us, they would banish Heroism from it, with its dreadful cortege of public calamities, and that Heroes would be relegated to the Temple of *Janus*⁶ in the same way old and useless arms are locked up in our Armories following war?

I know that among the qualities that must form the great man, courage is something, but away from battle valor is nothing. The brave man shows his worth only in battle; the true hero shows his every day, and his virtues—though they are sometimes displayed in pomp—are no less often put to use under a more modest character.

Let us dare to say it. Valor is so far from being the prime virtue of the Hero, that it is doubtful whether it should even be counted among the virtues. How could one honor by this name a quality on which so many scoundrels have based their crimes? No, a *Cataline* or a *Cromwell*⁷ would never have made his name famous; one of them would never have attempted to ruin his fatherland nor the other to enslave his, if the most unshakable intrepidity had not been the foundation of their character. With a few more virtues, you will tell me, they would have been Heroes. Say instead that with fewer crimes they would have been men.

I shall not review here those deadly warriors, the terror and scourge of the human race, those men eager for blood and conquests, whose names

cannot be pronounced without trembling: *Marius, Totila, Tamerlane*.⁸ I shall not take advantage of the justifiable horror they have inspired in nations. And is there any need to resort to monsters to prove that even the most generous bravery is more suspect in its principle, more variable in its examples, more deadly in its effects than is appropriate to the constancy, solidity, and advantages of virtue? How many memorable actions have been inspired by shame or by vanity? How many exploits, carried out in broad Daylight under the eyes of leaders and in the presence of a whole army, have been contradicted in the silence and obscurity of the night? Such a one is brave in the midst of his companions who would be nothing but a coward when left on his own; such a one has the head of a General who would never have the heart of a soldier; such a one stands in the breach to affront death and his enemy's sword who cannot bear the sight of the Surgeon's salutary scalpel in the privacy of his home.

So-and-so was brave on such-and-such a day, said Spaniards in the time of *Charles V*, and those people were knowledgeable about bravery.⁹ Indeed, there may be nothing quite so variable as valor, and there are very few sincere warriors who would dare be answerable for themselves for just twenty-four hours. *Ajax* terrifies *Hector*; *Hector* terrifies *Ajax* and flees from *Achilles*. *Antiochus the Great* was brave half his life and cowardly the other half. The victor over three-quarters of the World lost his heart and his head at Pharsala. *Caesar* himself was upset at Dyrrachium and afraid at Munda. The vanquisher of *Brutus* fled shamefully before *Octavius* and abandoned victory and control of the World to the person who depended on him for both of them. Will it be believed that I am citing examples from antiquity here for lack of modern ones?¹⁰

Therefore let us no longer be told that the palm of Heroism belongs only to valor and military talents. The reputation of great men is not measured by their exploits. The vanquished have taken the prize of glory from the victors a hundred times. Let a vote be taken and tell me who is greater: *Alexander* or *Porus*, *Pyrrhus* or *Fabricius*, *Antony* or *Brutus*, *Francis I* in chains or *Charles V* triumphant, *Valois* the victor or *Coligny* the vanquished?¹¹

What can we say about those great men who are all the more certainly immortal because they did not stain their hands in blood? What shall we say about the Legislator of Sparta, who, after having tasted the pleasure of ruling, had the courage to return the crown to its legitimate owner who did not even ask him for it; about that gentle and peaceful Citizen who knew how to avenge his injuries not by the death of the offender but by making him a decent man? Must we contradict the oracle which awarded him practically divine honors, and refuse Heroism to the per-

son who made heroes of all his compatriots? What shall we say about the Legislator of Athens who was able to preserve his freedom and virtue even at the Court of tyrants, and who dared to assert to the face of an opulent Monarch that power and riches do not make a man happy? What shall we say about the greatest of the Romans and most virtuous of men, about that model of citizens whose fatherland's oppressor did him the honor to hate him enough to take pen in hand against him, even after his death? Shall we insult Heroism by refusing its title to *Cato of Utica*? And yet this man did not distinguish himself in battles and did not fill the world with talk of his exploits. I am mistaken: he did perform one, the most difficult that has ever been undertaken, and the only one that will not be imitated, when from a body of warriors he formed a society of wise, equitable, and modest men.

It is well known that *Augustus*'s main trait was not valor. It was not on the shores of Actium nor on the plains at Philippi that he gathered the laurels which immortalized him but, rather, in Rome pacified and made happy. The Universe in submission did less for the glory and security of his life than the equity of his laws and the pardon of *Cinna*; thus the social virtues are preferable to courage even in Heroes! The greatest Captain in the world was assassinated in the middle of the Senate for a bit of indiscreet arrogance, for having wished to add a vain title to a real power; and the odious author of proscriptions—erasing his heinous crimes by means of justice and clemency—became the father of his fatherland which he had desolated and died adored by the Romans he had enslaved.¹²

Which of us will dare take from all these great men the Heroic crown that adorns their immortal heads? Who will dare refuse it to that Philosophical and beneficent warrior who, with a hand accustomed to brandishing arms, removes from our midst the calamities of a long and deadly war, and makes the sciences and fine arts shine among you with Royal splendor.¹³ O Spectacle worthy of the Heroic age! I see the Muses in their brilliance marching among your battalions with a confident step; Apollo and Mars crown each other; and your Island, still smoking from the ravages of the violence, brave the explosions henceforth from the shelter of these double laurels. Therefore decide, illustrious Citizens, which ones better deserved the Heroic palm: the Warriors who ran to your defense or the Wise Men who do everything for your happiness. Or rather, spare yourselves a useless choice, as with this double title you will have the same heads to crown.

To the examples that present themselves in a crowd and that I am not permitted to exhaust, let us add a few reflections that confirm the

inductions I wish to draw from them here. Assigning the first rank to valor in the Heroic character would be giving the arm that executes higher status than the head that plans. Yet, it is easier to find arms than heads. One can entrust the execution of a great project to others without losing its principal worth; but to execute someone else's project is voluntarily to accept a lower rank that is not suited to the Hero.

Thus, whatever the virtue that characterizes it might be, it must indicate genius and be inseparable from it. Heroic qualities do have their seed in the heart, but it is in the head that they develop and acquire solidity. The purest soul can lose its way even on the path of goodness if mind and reason do not guide it, and all virtues are corrupted without the collaboration of wisdom. Firmness easily degenerates into obstinacy, gentleness into weakness, zeal into fanaticism, valor into ferocity. Often a great undertaking that is badly organized does more harm to the person whose failure it is than a well-earned success would have honored him; for scorn is usually stronger than esteem. It even seems that in order to establish a brilliant reputation, talents compensate for virtues more easily than virtues do for talents. The Soldier from the North, with a narrow genius and unlimited courage, lost forever—right in the middle of his career—the glory he had acquired by marvels of valor and generosity; and public opinion is still unsure whether the murderer of *Charles Stuart* is not one of the greatest men who ever lived even with all his heinous crimes.¹⁴

Bravery does not constitute a character; on the contrary, it is from the character of the person who possesses it that it derives its particular form. That form is virtue in a virtuous soul and vice in a wicked one. The knight *Bayard* was brave; *Cartouche* was too.¹⁵ But will anyone ever believe that they were brave in the same way? Valor can assume every form. It is generous or brutal, stupid or enlightened, furious or tranquil depending on the soul that possesses it. According to circumstances, it is the sword of vice or the shield of virtue; and because it does not necessarily indicate either greatness of soul or that of mind, it is not the virtue most necessary for a Hero. Pardon me, valiant and unfortunate People who has for so long filled Europe with talk of your exploits and misfortunes. No, it is not to the bravery of those of your Fellow citizens who have spilled their blood for their country that I shall award the Heroic crown, but to their ardent love for the fatherland and to their invincible constancy in adversity. To be Heroes with such feelings, they could even have done without being brave.¹⁶

I have attacked a dangerous and too widespread opinion. I do not have the same reasons to follow the method of exclusions in all its details. All

virtues arise from the different relationships that Society has established between men. Now the number of these relationships is almost infinite. How great a task would it be therefore to undertake to cover all of them? It would be immense, since there are as many possible virtues among men as there are real vices. It would be superfluous, because among the great and difficult virtues the Hero needs in order to command well, one could not include as necessary the large number of even more demanding virtues the multitude needs in order to obey. So-and-so who shined in the first rank would have died obscure, without having made himself noticed, had he been born in the lowest. I do not know what would have happened to *Epictetus* on the world's throne. But I know very well that had *Caesar* himself been in the place of Epictetus, he would never have been anything but a puny slave.¹⁷

Let us confine ourselves then, for brevity, to the divisions established by the Philosophers, and be satisfied to cover the four principal virtues to which they relate all the others, since we are very sure that the basis of Heroism should not be sought in qualities that are accessory, obscure, and subordinate.

But shall we say that justice is that basis, whereas it is on injustice that the majority of great men have founded the monument to their glory? Some, intoxicated with love for the fatherland, have found nothing to be illegitimate in its service and have not hesitated to use for its benefit odious means which their generous souls could never have resolved to use for their own. Others, consumed by ambition, have labored only to put their country in chains. Fervor for revenge has brought others to betray it. Some have been avid conquerors, others clever usurpers, still others have not been ashamed to become the Ministers of someone else's tyranny. Some have scorned their duty, others have made light of their faith. A few have been unjust systematically, others through weakness, the majority through ambition. All achieved immortality.

Justice then is not the virtue that characterizes the Hero. It will be no more convincing to say that it is temperance or moderation, as it is for lack of the latter virtue that the most famous men have made themselves immortal, and the vice opposed to the former has not prevented any among them from becoming so, not even *Alexander*, whom this awful vice covered with the blood of his friend; not even *Caesar*, who, after his death, was not deprived of a single altar because of the dissoluteness of his life.

Prudence is more a quality of the mind than a virtue of the soul. But however one envisages it, it is always found to have more solidity than brilliance, and it serves rather to set off the other virtues than to shine

on its own. Prudence, says Montaigne, so tender and circumspect, is the mortal enemy of high performances and all genuinely heroic acts. If it prevents great faults, it also harms great undertakings, for there are few of these in which it is not necessary to leave much more always to chance than suits a wise man.¹⁸ Besides, the character of Heroism is to carry its own virtues to the highest degree. But nothing is so close to pusillanimity as excessive prudence, and one scarcely rises above men except by sometimes trampling on human reason. Therefore, prudence is also not the characteristic virtue of the Hero.

Temperance is even less so, as the trait which Heroism itself, which is nothing other than an intemperate taste for glory, seems to exclude. Where are the Heroes who have not been degraded by excesses of some type? Alexander, they say, was chaste, but was he sober? Did not this emulator of the first vanquisher of India imitate its dissolutions? Did he not combine them all when, in pursuit of a Courtesan, he burned the Palace at Persepolis? Ah, if only he had had a Mistress! In his deadly debauchery, he would not have killed his friend. Caesar was sober, but was he chaste, he who introduced unheard-of prostitutions into Rome and changed sex at whim? Alcibiades had every sort of intemperate taste and was no less one of the great men of Greece. Cato the Elder himself loved money and wine. He had ignoble vices and was the admiration of the Romans. And those people were knowledgeable about glory.

The virtuous man is just, prudent, moderate without being a Hero on that account, and too frequently the Hero is none of those things. Let us not be afraid to agree about it: often it is even to the scorn of these virtues that Heroism has owed its brilliance. What happens when we consider *Caesar*, *Alexander*, *Pyrrhus*, *Hannibal* from this angle? With fewer vices, they might have been less famous; for glory is the reward of Heroism, but there must be some other reward for virtue.

If the virtues had to be distributed to those they suit best, I would assign prudence to the Statesman, justice to the Citizen, moderation to the Philosopher. As for strength of soul, I would give it to the Hero, and he would have no reason to complain about his share.

Indeed, strength is the true foundation of Heroism, it is the source or the supplement of the virtues that constitute it, and it is what makes it suitable for great things. Bring together as you will the qualities that can work in concert to make a great man; if you do not add strength to animate them, they all languish and Heroism disappears. On the contrary, strength of soul alone necessarily confers a great number of Heroic virtues on a person who is endowed with it, and compensates for all the others.

Just as one can perform actions of virtue without being virtuous, one can perform great actions without having the right to Heroism. The Hero does not always perform great actions; but he is always ready to do so if needed and shows himself to be great in all the circumstances of his life. That is what distinguishes him from the ordinary man. An invalid can take up a spade and cultivate the soil for a few moments, but he soon becomes exhausted and grows weary. A robust farmer does not endure hard labor without respite, but he could do so without harming himself, and he owes this ability to his bodily strength. Strength of soul is the same thing. It consists in always being able to act forcefully.

Men are more blind than wicked, and there is more weakness than maliciousness in their vices. We deceive ourselves before we deceive others, and our faults come only from our errors. We hardly commit any of them except because we let ourselves be won over by petty current interests which make us forget things that are more important and more remote. From that come all the pettinesses that characterize the ordinary person: inconstancy, thoughtlessness, capriciousness, imposture, fanaticism, cruelty—vices which all have their source in weakness of the soul. On the contrary, everything is great and generous in a strong soul, because it knows how to distinguish the beautiful from the specious, reality from appearance, and to fasten on its object with that firmness that removes illusions and surmounts the greatest obstacles.

So it is that uncertain judgment and an easily seduced heart make men weak and small. To be great, it is necessary only to become master of oneself. Our most formidable enemies are within ourselves; and whoever has been able to fight and defeat them will have done more for glory, in the judgment of Wise Men, than if he had conquered the Universe.

That is what produces strength of soul. That is how it can enlighten the mind, enlarge genius, and give energy and vigor to all the other virtues. It can even take the place of those we lack, for a person who would be neither courageous, nor just, nor wise, nor moderate by inclination will be so however by reason, as soon as, having overcome his passions and conquered his prejudices, he feels how much it is to his advantage to be so; as soon as he is convinced that he can make his own happiness only by working for that of others. Strength, then, is the virtue that characterizes Heroism, and it is confirmed by another unanswerable argument which I take from the reflections of a great man. The other virtues, *Bacon* says, free us from the domination of the vices; only strength protects us from that of fortune.¹⁹ Indeed, what virtues do not need certain circumstances to make them function? What good is justice with tyrants, prudence with madmen, temperance in the midst of poverty? But all

events honor the strong man, happiness and adversity serve equally for his glory, and he rules no less in chains than on the Throne. The martyrdom of Regulus in Carthage,²⁰ the festivities for Cato expelled from the consulate, the composure of Epictetus crippled by his master are no less illustrious than the triumphs of Alexander and Caesar. And if Socrates had died in his bed, people today might suspect that he was nothing more than a clever Sophist.

After determining the virtue most suited to the Hero, I am also supposed to talk about those who attained Heroism without possessing it.²¹ But how would they have attained it without the trait which alone constitutes the true Hero and is essential to him? I have nothing to say about this, and that is the triumph of my cause. Among the famous men whose names are inscribed on the temple of Glory, some have lacked wisdom, others moderation. There have been those who were cruel, unjust, imprudent, perfidious. All have had weaknesses. None of them has been a weak man. In short, all the other virtues might have been lacking in some great men, but there was never a Hero without strength of soul.